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Enhancing the Pedagogy of Poetry Study through Linguistic Stylistics: A Textual Case Study of Diop's 'Africa' with Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Implications

Manthekeleng Agnes Linake[a]

a. Department of Languages and Literacy, Faculty of Education, University of fort Hare, East London, South Africa.
Email: mlinake@ufh.ac.za

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the linguistic stylistic features of the celebrated poem *Africa* to demonstrate how linguistic stylistics serves as a robust analytical tool for poetry interpretation. Linguistic stylistics, grounded in general linguistics, provides a systematic approach to understanding how authors employ language to encode meaning, convey cultural and historical experiences, and evoke reader response. The analysis considers the poem's graphological, phonological, syntactic, and lexico-semantic features, highlighting how these elements reinforce the thematic concerns of pre-colonial idealisation, colonial oppression, and post-colonial liberty. Graphologically, the poem's free-verse and free-punctuation style foregrounds the central theme of liberty, creating visual and rhythmic continuity that mirrors Africa's gradual emancipation. Phonologically, the strategic use of alliteration, rhythm, and repetition accentuates the emotional intensity and draws attention to metaphoric expressions that reflect the struggles and resilience of African people. Syntactic structures, including parallelism, simple declarative sentences, and rhetorical interrogatives, enhance clarity and thematic emphasis, while lexico-semantic features such as collocations, lexical repetitions, and apostrophes convey vivid imagery and personify Africa as both subject and interlocutor. These features collectively demonstrate the poet's stylistic sophistication and deliberate encoding of meaning. This study shows that linguistic stylistics complements traditional literary criticism by providing a structured and detailed framework for exploring how form, sound, syntax, and word choice shape thematic interpretation. Positioned as a qualitative textual case study (theoretical application), the paper demonstrates an explicit analytic procedure (coding and pattern identification) and draws culturally responsive pedagogical implications for teaching African poetry in multilingual, postcolonial classrooms. The findings advocate for wider adoption of linguistic stylistics in literary pedagogy, encouraging scholars, educators, and students to integrate this method in the systematic analysis of poetry, thereby enhancing comprehension, critical thinking, and appreciation of literary texts.

KEYWORDS

Linguistic stylistics; poetry analysis; Africa; graphology; phonology; syntax; lexico-semantics; pedagogical stylistics; culturally responsive pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry, like prose and drama as genres of literature, is traditionally and predominantly analysed, interpreted and evaluated from the perspective of the literary critical method (Anyanwu, 2020; Burke, 2014; Crystal & Davy, 2016). Thus, the literary critical method, or literary criticism, has been privileged as the primary method of literary studies (Ellis, 1970). In this regard, Jensen (2015) asserts that developments in literary criticism over the years have contributed significantly to the history of literature. As an academic discipline, literary criticism is a field of study where various genres of works of art are analysed, described and interpreted to evaluate the message of the writer (Ogum, 2017). It is a discipline that seeks to formulate aesthetic and methodological principles on which the critic can evaluate a text (Bressler, 2003; Hashim, 2017). Therefore, literary criticism is the systematic study of literary works whether prose, poetry, or drama. As a literary practice, it concentrates on defining, classifying, analysing, evaluating, interpreting, and explaining literary texts by applying relevant interpretative instruments called literary theories (Short, 2016).

Moreover, literary criticism can concern itself with the socio-cultural background against which a particular work is written, the lives of the authors, and how their experiences led them to write the way they did (Verdonk, 2013). Furthermore, literary criticism involves reading, interpreting and commentary on a specific text or texts which have been designated literature. In this view, it is practised by professional critics and circulated in published form in books and journals. It is also practised by literature students in essays, examination answers or dissertations (Webster, 1996).

However, literary criticism has been criticised for over-concentrating on authors and placing too much emphasis on the intuition of the critic (Obadan, 2017; Widdowson, 2013). This approach does not make provision for the reader to verify the validity or otherwise of intuitive judgement concerning a particular literary text before concluding (Abdulmughni, 2019). In view of this, literary criticism is regarded as impressionistic in its approach (Hall, 2014). These perceived shortcomings, among others, have engendered the emergence of the linguistic stylistic method as an alternative approach to the study of literary works (Candria, 2019). Considering this, the study explores the linguistic stylistics approach to studying poetry. The study further elucidates the concept of linguistic stylistics. It examines poetry as a genre of literature and identifies features of the language of poetry. Particularly, the study carries out a linguistic stylistic analysis of a poem to match theory with practice, and the study concludes that knowledge of poetry analysis can be enhanced by deploying a linguistic stylistic approach to the study of poetry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is theoretically grounded in **general linguistics** and **linguistic stylistics,** drawing on the premise that literary meaning is systematically encoded in patterned linguistic choices rather than being solely the product of intuitive interpretation (Halliday, 1967; Leech & Short,

2013; Moldagali et al., 2024; Simpson, 2014). Linguistic stylistics provides an analytical bridge between linguistics and literary criticism by offering a principled and replicable framework for examining how language functions in literary texts.

Halliday (1967) argues that literary texts can be described using categories derived from general linguistic theory, thereby positioning literary language as neither mystical nor ineffable, but analysable through identifiable linguistic systems. From this perspective, meaning is realised through structured choices within the lexico-grammatical and semantic systems of language. Linguistic stylistics therefore moves beyond impressionistic evaluation by grounding interpretation in observable textual evidence.

Leech and Short (2013) further develop this position by proposing that stylistic analysis should proceed through systematic examination of different linguistic levels, including graphology, phonology, grammar, and lexis. They emphasise that the aim of stylistics is not merely to catalogue linguistic features, but to explain how these features contribute to thematic construction and artistic effect. Similarly, Simpson (2014) conceptualises stylistics as a resource for uncovering how texts encode ideological positions, emotional intensities, and reader alignment through patterned linguistic foregrounding.

In this study, the theoretical framework is operationalised through four interrelated levels of linguistic description:

- **Graphology**: examining visual layout, punctuation, lineation, and typographical organisation as meaning-bearing features.
- **Phonology**: analysing sound patterning, including alliteration, rhythm, repetition, and prosodic effects.
- **Syntax**: investigating sentence structure, parallelism, clause patterning, and rhetorical configuration.
- **Lexico-semantics**: exploring lexical fields, collocation, repetition, metaphor, and semantic clustering.

These levels are treated not as isolated categories but as interacting systems that collectively shape interpretive meaning. The framework therefore adopts the principle of **foregrounding**, whereby deviation, repetition, or parallelism renders certain linguistic forms stylistically salient, thereby directing reader attention and intensifying thematic concerns.

Importantly, this framework is not only analytical but also pedagogical. Within the tradition of **pedagogical stylistics** (Hall, 2014; Simpson, 2014), explicit attention to linguistic patterning can scaffold learners' interpretive skills by making the mechanics of meaning-making visible. When students are guided to identify how form shapes content, poetry becomes less opaque and more accessible. This is particularly significant in African literary contexts, where poetry often encodes historical memory, colonial experience, and cultural identity through condensed linguistic structures. By grounding interpretation in systematic linguistic description, this theoretical framework supports the central argument of this study: that linguistic stylistics

offers both an analytically rigorous and pedagogically effective approach to the study of African poetry.

Aim and Questions of the Study

Aim of the study

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate through a transparent and replicable linguistic stylistic procedure, how multi-level linguistic description (graphology, phonology, syntax, and lexico-semantics) can support systematic poetry interpretation and inform culturally responsive pedagogy when teaching African literary texts.

Research questions

- Which graphological, phonological, syntactic, and lexico-semantic features are foregrounded in Diop's 'Africa'?
- How do these foregrounded features contribute to the poem's representation of pre-colonial idealisation, colonial oppression, and post-colonial liberty?
- What culturally responsive pedagogical implications can be derived from this stylistic reading for teaching African poetry in multilingual and postcolonial contexts?

METHOD

Research design

This article adopts a qualitative textual case study design (theoretical application / close reading) in which a single poem is analysed as a bounded 'case' to demonstrate an analytic framework.

Data/source of text

The primary data are the 24-line poem 'Africa' by David Diop (as reproduced in Senanu & Vincent, 1988).

Data collection tool

A linguistic stylistics checklist adapted from Leech and Short's (2013) levels of analysis guided feature identification at four levels: graphology, phonology, syntax, and lexico-semantics.

Analytic procedure (coding and pattern identification)

The poem was first segmented into numbered lines (units of analysis). A two-stage coding process was then applied: (1) feature coding (marking instances of foregrounded forms such as repetition, parallelism, alliteration, apostrophe, and salient collocations), and **(2)** functional coding (linking each coded feature to its discourse-pragmatic function and thematic contribution). Patterns were identified through recurrence (frequency), clustering (co-occurrence across adjacent lines), and salience (foregrounding via deviation or parallelism).

Validation / trustworthiness

To strengthen credibility, an audit trail of coded lines and feature labels was kept; interpretations were checked for internal consistency across levels (e.g., whether lexico-semantic claims were supported by syntactic/phonological patterning). Where possible, interpretations were triangulated by comparing multiple features that converged on the same thematic effect (e.g., repetition + parallelism + apostrophe in the oppression sequence).

Data analysis techniques

The analysis is presented descriptively and interpretively, moving from formal description to contextual meaning, consistent with the stylistic practice of relating linguistic patterning to interpretive effects (Leech & Short, 2013).

FINDINGS

Text for analysis: Diop's 'Africa'

1. Africa my Africa
2. Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs
3. Africa of whom my grandmother sings
4. On the banks of the distant river
5. I have never known you
6. But your blood flows in my veins
7. Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields
8. The blood of your sweat
9. The sweat of your work
10. The work of your slavery
11. The slavery of your children
12. Africa tell me Africa
13. Is this your back that is bent
14. This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
15. This back that trembles with red scars
16. And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun
17. But a grave voice answers me
18. Impetuous child that tree young and strong
19. That tree over there
20. Splendidly alone amidst white and faded flowers
21. That is your Africa springing up anew
22. Springing up patiently, obstinately
23. Whose fruits bit by bit acquire
24. The bitter taste of liberty.

Graphological level of analysis

Graphologically, the poem is displayed in 24 lines. Each line is not punctuated except the last line. When a poem is written in this manner, it is usually described as a free-verse style or a free-punctuation style (Short, 2016). This free verse and free punctuation graphological design are utilised to foreground the central theme of the poem, which is liberty. In this regard, the poetic content is reflected in the graphological form of the poem. It can, therefore, be suggested that the style of the poem is graphologically designed to relate content to form.

Phonological level of analysis

Alliteration is used to create a specific sound effect in the poem. Instances of this are highlighted below:

- beautiful black blood (line 7)
- faded flowers (line 20)
- bit by bit (line 23)

In line 7, 'beautiful black blood' is a metaphor to humanise and adore black people in Africa. In line 20, 'faded flowers' is a metaphor that depicts the waning influence of colonialism in Africa, while 'bit by bit' in line 23 points to the gradual emancipation of Africa from colonialism. The use of alliteration in these instances enunciates sound aesthetics that draw attention to the metaphoric signification of these expressions.

In lines 7–11, rhythm is introduced into the poem using symbolic words such as blood, sweat, work, and slavery. The lexical item 'blood' in line 7 appears as the first lexical item in line 8. The lexical item 'sweat' as the last word in line 8 appears as the first lexical item in line 9. The word 'work' appears as the last word in line 9 but also appears as the first word in line 10, while the lexical item 'slavery', which appears as the last word in line 10, appears as the first word in line 11. All these lexical items, which are monosyllabic, symbolise the unique precarious conditions of Africans under colonial experience. This device intensifies the passion with which the poetic persona depicts Africa as the entity he writes about.

Syntactic level of analysis

The syntactic texture of the poem is largely composed of phrases and simple sentences. Of the 24 syntactic structures that constitute the poem, 12 structures are noun phrases. These syntactic devices make the thematic concern of the poem accessible and poignant. These are found in lines 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, 19, 20, 22 and 24. There are also 11 simple declarative sentences deployed in the poem. Like the use of phrases, the use of simple sentences foregrounds the poet's style to make his descriptions simple and unambiguous. These simple declarative sentences are found in lines 3, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21 and 23. The preponderant use of these simple declarative sentences underscores the poet's use of the poem to assert his worldview and disposition about Africa in a catchy and vivid manner.

There is only one interrogative sentence in the poem, and this is found in line 13. This interrogative sentence functions as a rhetorical question to draw attention to the plight of Africans under colonialism. This fine blend of varied syntactic structures is an artistic device to make the poem dynamic and engaging, thereby preventing it from being monotonous in its syntactic composition.

Another syntactic feature of the poem is syntactic parallelism. The use of syntactic parallelism attains stylistic significance in the poem. This is found in lines 8–11 and is shown below:

Table 1: Syntactic Parallelism in Lines 8–11 of the Poem

Definite article	Noun	Preposition	Pronoun	Noun
the	blood	of	your	seat
the	sweat	of	your	work
the	work	of	your	slavery
the	slavery	of	your	children

Apart from the element of rhythm and metre that these parallel structures bring into the poem, they also create a balanced flow of ideas in painting the pictures of oppression, subjugation and dehumanisation that Africa suffered under European colonisation. Therefore, parallelism is employed as a tool for emphasis in drawing attention to the cruelty of slavery and the injustice of colonisation in Africa.

Lexico-semantic level of analysis

At the lexico-semantic level, the poet deploys lexical choices that are descriptive and active in the poem. The identifiable lexico-semantic features in the poem are lexical collocation, lexical repetition and apostrophe. The pattern of lexical choice reveals three eras of African experience that the poem seeks to enact, and these eras correspond to three themes found in the poem. The first era is the pre-colonial era, which suggests the theme of an idealised Africa. The second era is that of colonialism with the theme of oppression and the third is the envisioned independent Africa with the theme of liberty.

The lexical choices that depict the pre-colonial era and the theme of an idealised Africa are ‘proud warriors’, ‘ancestral savannahs’, ‘distant river’, ‘beautiful black blood’, and ‘grandmother sings’. Those that portray the oppressive colonial era are ‘blood’, ‘sweat’, ‘slavery’, ‘back that breaks’, ‘humiliation’, ‘trembling’, ‘red scars’, ‘whip under the midday sun’ and ‘bitter taste’. The lexical items that depict the envisioned post-colonial era of liberty are ‘springing up anew’, ‘young and strong’, ‘splendidly’, ‘springing up patiently’, ‘fruits’ and ‘liberty’.

These lexical choices include lexical collocations. Lexical collocation is the use of two or more lexical items that co-occur, have a semantic relationship and serve specific communication functions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Beare, 2019). The poet largely uses lexical collocation to build up the poem and express his message. Other instances of lexical collocation include ‘ancestral savannahs’, ‘distant river’, ‘proud warriors’, ‘midday sun’, ‘faded flowers’ and ‘bit by bit’. The collocational items ‘ancestral savannahs’, ‘distant river’ and ‘midday sun’ point to the geographical environment of Africa. Through these collocations, the poet portrays Africa as a continent that is well endowed by nature. The term ‘proud warriors’ indicates the military prowess of African people, representing them as brave and courageous.

Furthermore, faded flowers, as a collocation, is a metaphor for the unpopularity of colonial adventure in Africa, while 'bit by bit' emphasises the gradual liberation of Africa from the shackles of foreign occupation.

Lexical repetition: There is lexical repetition of 'Africa' (lines 1–3 and line 12) and repetition chains around 'blood/sweat/work/slavery' (lines 7–11), which function as cohesive devices that foreground both belonging (ancestral identification) and exploitation (labour extraction). This repetition pattern was identified through feature coding of repeated lexical items and then linked to thematic clusters (identity; oppression; liberation).

It is important to note that apostrophe is used as a major rhetorical strategy to construct the poem. An apostrophe is a figure of speech in which an absent person or entity is addressed as if present or capable of hearing (Wales, 2014; Khadjieva & Jumambetova, 2020). In the poem, the following expressions are apostrophes:

Africa my Africa (line 1)
Africa tell me Africa (line 12)
Is this your back that is bent (line 13)
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation (line 14)
This back trembling with red scars (line 15)

In line 1, the apostrophe celebrates Africa and expresses a nostalgic feeling for Africa as the ancestral home of the poet. Line 12 personifies Africa and enunciates affective attachment to her. In lines 13–15, the poetic persona identifies with and empathises with Africa as he paints pictures of a catalogue of woes in which Africa is entrapped. Overall, the lexico-semantic language of the poem is simple, direct, apt and image-evoking. This lexical exactitude allows for semantic accessibility, which makes the poem easy to comprehend and the thematic concerns easy to understand.

DISCUSSION

From stylistic description to culturally responsive poetry pedagogy

This section relates the stylistic findings to culturally responsive and decolonial approaches to poetry teaching in African classrooms. At the level of classroom practice, a stylistic approach supports academic success by giving learners an explicit metalanguage for discussing how meaning is built through form (Leech & Short, 2013; Simpson, 2014). It also supports cultural competence by foregrounding how poems encode historical experience, identity, and collective memory, which is central to culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Recent South African scholarship shows that learners often experience prescribed poetry as distant from their life-worlds, and that mechanistic, assessment-driven teaching can alienate learners from the genre (Genis & Byrne, 2024; Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020). Against this backdrop, linguistically informed close reading can be mobilised as a culturally responsive practice when it is combined with learner meaning-making, multilingual resources, and dialogic discussion.

Pedagogical implications (suggested classroom sequence)

Step 1: Contextual anchoring (Ubuntu/relational entry): begin with a short dialogue about 'Africa' as home, memory, and struggle, inviting learners' linguistic repertoires and community knowledge.

Step 2: Guided noticing: provide a simplified stylistics checklist (graphology, sound, syntax, word choices). Learners work in groups to 'find and label' features in specific lines (feature coding).

Step 3: Meaning-making circles: groups explain how features create emphasis, emotion, or imagery, linking to themes (functional coding).

Step 4: Multimodal response: learners revoice the poem (spoken-word performance, soundscape, or visual mapping of repetition chains), aligning with multimodal poetry teaching practices reported in South African contexts (Genis & Byrne, 2024).

Step 5: Culturally responsive extension: learners write a short poem or stanza that addresses a contemporary issue in their community, using at least two stylistic devices identified in Diop's poem; this opens space for indigenous and multilingual poetic expression, consistent with decolonial/indigenous poetry pedagogy (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020).

These steps align with pedagogical stylistics research which shows that structured stylistic scaffolding can deepen learners' engagement and meaning construction, including in South African language classrooms (Jaxa, 2024). Importantly, culturally responsive' here is not only about text selection; it is also about method on how learners' voices, languages, and lived experiences are positioned as resources for interpretation and response.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has explicated the role of linguistic stylistic methods in literary interpretation, especially in the literary genre of poetry. The conceptual underpinning of linguistic stylistics as a field of study in the discipline of general linguistics has been examined. The study carried out a linguistic stylistic study of the poem "Africa" to demonstrate how linguistic stylistics applies to poetry analysis. This has demonstrated that the linguistic stylistic approach is a viable alternative to poetry analysis alongside the traditional approach of literary criticism. Indeed, linguistic stylistics is concerned with how the author utilises language resources to encode the thematic preoccupation of a text. Hence, the analysis in this paper attests to the fact that the linguistic stylistic method provides an organised and systematic illumination of poetry analysis and interpretation.

Recommendations

Future studies may extend the procedure to a corpus of African poems to compare stylistic patterning across poets, periods, and languages.

Teacher education programmes can integrate 'pedagogical stylistics' tasks (guided noticing, collaborative interpretation, multimodal response) to strengthen poetry pedagogy.

In multilingual classrooms, stylistic analysis should be paired with translanguaging-friendly discussion so that learners' home languages become interpretive resources rather than barriers.

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